

Lose the Ship, Save the People



Gary Wilkerson March 11, 2013

By Acts 27, Paul had already led a full life of ministry. This man had accomplished incredible things, yet he still had a burning passion to pour out his life for the gospel.

Paul had been called by God as an apostle and had overseen churches throughout Asia and some parts of Europe. Yet he was also an evangelist and apologist; he made the case for Christ before courts and kings. Paul had sacrificed all to serve in his Spirit-directed missions. Now he determined, “I want to take the gospel of Christ to the very epicentre of the world. I have set my vision on Rome, to preach to Caesar himself!”

Paul was so intent on this that he gambled with his own life to see it fulfilled. He was in prison at the time and had an opportunity to be released. But Paul bypassed his release in exchange for the chance to appear before Caesar, to whom he appealed his case. If Paul lost, he could lose his life. It was a choice he made solely for the gospel’s sake.

You can endure a lot of suffering when your heart is set on a purpose but if your heart is set on comfort, you can’t endure any suffering at all.

In his journey to Rome, Paul was taken aboard a ship that soon ran into resistance: “The winds were against us” (Acts 27:4). This was an obstacle of nature, but Paul might easily have seen it as a spiritual roadblock. The fact is, if you’ve set your face like flint with a gospel vision, all hell will break loose against you.

That phrase could be used to describe Paul’s life to that point. He had endured many tribulations, from shipwrecks to beatings to stoning to assassination plots. Paul was able to endure it all because his mind was always set on his mission: living, preaching and serving Christ.

The Bible makes clear what our mission is. As Christians we are called to proclaim the grace of God to a fallen, sinful world. We are called to love one another and worship together in true gospel community. We are called to minister to the poor, and by doing all these things we bring the light of Christ to a world in darkness. In short, we are called to deliver God’s love to others through our words and actions, that the world might be changed.

If you’re a Christian who chooses to sit on the sidelines of faith — if you go to church for comfort only — you won’t get much resistance from the enemy. But if you’re determined to live for Jesus in the ways I’ve outlined — if you have a gospel vision for the hurting, the lost and Christ’s body — Satan will throw his entire arsenal at you. Like Paul, your journey will be fraught with trials and perils that shake your soul.

This chapter in Paul’s life illustrates how some of us react to Satan’s buffetings. As the ship carrying Paul completed the first leg of the journey, we read: “Because the harbor was not suitable to spend the winter in, the majority decided to put out to sea from there, on the chance that somehow they could reach Phoenix...and spend the winter there” (27:12).

Paul was against this decision, not just because it took them out of the way to Rome but because the Spirit warned his heart about it. Later, the ship ran into serious trouble because of it, nearly costing everyone’s life, but at the time it seemed the most convenient decision to make.

I point this out because when some Christians encounter the enemy's resistance on their mission, they decide to "go to Phoenix for the winter." Granted, all of us need vacations to refresh our spirits from constant ministry to others' needs. But I'm referring to something different — to a condition of the heart that says, "Take your mission a bit easier. Pull back and cruise a little."

When Christians do this, they're soon off their course entirely. Their mission is no longer Christ but, rather, taking care of the ship — and that means steering it away from storms. In effect, they withdraw from the resistance that's thrown at them.

These believers don't know it, but they've been robbed of their high calling. That is no small thing in God's eyes. If I'm sailing toward Phoenix instead of to Rome, it means nobody is going to Rome with the mission God gave me. A ship is being maintained and kept in working condition — but, ironically, the mission for that ship isn't being fulfilled.

Comfort and rest are not the point of the kingdom. Kingdom living says, "My life is not my own — I have been bought with a price. Jesus guides me in everything. And he supplies me with the grace to accomplish it, no matter what resistance may come."

Paul's ship eventually crashed onto the rocks, shattering into pieces.

Paul didn't blink when disaster came. Consider the scene: "Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul stood up among them and said, 'Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.' So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. But we must run aground on some island'" (27:21-26).

I don't know about you, but I would have a hard time hearing this word. "My ship is about to crash? Whoa, Lord, what's happening here?"

What about you? What would you do if you were told your ship was going to sink? How would you react if your calling was threatened by circumstances beyond your control? Many of us would have an identity crisis. That's because our identity is wrapped up in our calling — whether that calling is our family or work or even ministry. Our ship can be our home, our new car, our kids' success at sports or a hundred or more other things. We should thank God for the ships in our life, but none of them has equal value to Christ and the people he has called us to serve.

Our identity cannot be in anything other than Christ. It has to be anchored in what he has done for us, not what we do for him. That means we have to do as his voice directs us, not whatever "ministry experts" tell us. Too often expert advice focuses on the ship, not on the destination Christ has named for us. Our ship is just a tool to get us there — and our Lord can do with the ship whatever he wants.

Paul knew this, even as his ship splintered into pieces. He never got his eyes off his calling, which was Christ. That's why he was so calm throughout the storm. Paul was burdened for all 275 souls on board, and he had God's assurance that each would be spared. Someone's precious ship was about to go down, but Paul encouraged them all, "We are to press on."

Paul never quit. And I want to encourage everyone serving Jesus to do the same. If God has called you to something, it doesn't matter what storms may arise. He says, "It is not over. When everything seems out of control, I am in control. Do not give up!"

There is something else we can lose sight of during our storms. That is, the ship we're on is a battleship. We are in a war with Satan, so we face a constant battle with the powers of darkness. That's another reason why we can't afford to "spend the winter in Phoenix."

We are doing war against an enemy who brings depression, who attacks marriages, who is at work enslaving a new generation of teenagers to heroin, a growing problem in many cities. We have gone to war believing Christ's

glorious gospel will set captives free — that he is faithful to break the chains of those in bondage, to liberate families mired in troubles, to reach the neediest with his generous love. To be in this battle, it is imperative that we keep our focus on the mission he has given us — and to hear his voice directing us.

Our mission is always secondary; what is primary is knowing in whom we have believed.

Jesus has called us to radical service and worship. Our success in this is determined not by whether our ministry group is thriving but whether we are continually laying down our lives for his sake.

Does this speak to you? Has your ship taken precedence over Jesus in your heart? Have you become caught up in fleshly concerns, whether it's making a good living or having a successful ministry? Neither is God's high calling for you. Don't misunderstand: He doesn't want you to stop working hard or serving with devotion. Yet could he be speaking to you right now about what's most important in your heart?

If you have been spending your winters in Phoenix, he is calling you back to your journey to Rome. Set aside everything that keeps you from being "on a mission for Jesus." And pray this prayer with me: "God, you gave me this ship — it's yours to use however you wish. Point it in the direction you would have it to go, and I'll steer it faithfully. I trust you to lead me into the destiny you have planned for me, whatever that is. My desire is simply to hear you and obey. I put my life in your hands, because I long to see you lifted up and glorified. Amen."

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